

The woman in black



No reader of *The Woman in Black* Can be left in doubt about its conscious evocation of the Gothic. It is full of motifs and effects associated with that genre,' How far would you agree with this statement of the novel?

I agree undeniably, with the above statement, as the novel is a pastiche of the Victorian/Edwardian ghost story which is a sub-genre of the Gothic. Thus consciously evoking the Gothic. However, it could be argued that Susan Hill at times cleverly manipulates the motifs and effects associated with the Gothic genre.

It is these motifs and effects that are present in the gothic genre, which I will discuss in ' *The Women in Black*' (1983). I will begin by briefly discussing this essay on the genre itself

The Gothic genre is a genre that has been burning artistically for centuries, ever since it was more or less invented by Horace Walpole in the classical gothic novel ' *The Castle of Otranto*' 1765 possessed the indispensable and core elements of this genre, it was set to be a benchmark for following work in this field such as ' *The Woman in White*' (1860) by Wilkie Collins, ' *The Italian*' (1797) by Ann Radcliff, ' *The Monk*' (1796) by Mathew Lewis' and Bram Stokers ' *Dracula*' (1897).

' *The Women in Black*' is full of Gothic elements and conventions throughout. The reader at first realises the effectiveness of the first person narrative of the novel; this is delivered by Arthur Kipps the main character of the story. Effectively, the reader gains a first hand insight of thoughts, feelings and emotions of Arthur instantly as they happen. Therefore, slowly but gradually the reader becomes attached to Arthur due to the sense of immediacy that

they experience with the unfolding of emotions, thoughts and events when Arthur does. This is initially used in the opening chapter 'Christmas Eve' when Arthur states;

'I was seized by something I cannot possibly describe, an emotion, a desire—no, it was rather more, a knowledge, a simple certainty, which gripped me,'

Indisputably, the Christmas Eve opening of 'The Woman in Black' echoes the opening of Henry James's 'Turn of the Screw'. It is a convention of the ghost story were in the 'festive season' people gather by the fire and make up 'lurid inventions' about 'vampires' to even 'rats' and 'bats'. In addition the intertextuality of the novel is emphasised with the striking resemblance between Arthur Kipps and Jonathon Harker in Bram Stoker's 'Dracula' (1897).

Here both are lawyers and both are very rational which is exemplified when Arthur describes himself as a 'commonsensical' man. Another example of the novel's intertextuality is one of the chapters actual name; 'Oh whistle and I'll come to you' which is taken from an M. R. James ghost story. These thoroughly present intertextuality continuously imprints on the reader the elements of the novel, the ghost story. This is also agreed by most English critics like (1) Alan Jones who says; Hills novel also shows an eclectic indebtedness to other text. The referential quality of text like Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* or Lewis's *The Monk*, with their nods in the direction of medieval manuscript, Shakespeare, graveyard poetry and so on, finds full measure in the pages of her text.

The first attribute acknowledged by the reader as a common Gothic element is the setting of 'The Women in Black.' overall, there are two main settings

of the story, one being Monk's Piece where Arthur begins the story of 'The Women in Black.' Initially, Monk's Piece is presented as place from out of reach from civilisation, an area of remoteness and isolation, a place really distant. Arthur describes its 'air of remoteness and isolation which makes us feel ourselves to be much further from civilization.'

The supernatural or otherwise inexplicable events are a key theme in the Gothic genre and "The Woman in Black" is no exception. In "The Woman in Black" is the constant emphasis of man versus nature that is repeated throughout. Susan Hill provides an undetectable malevolent and treacherous force, using nature, whether it's a fog, sea-freaks or a mist. The ultimate felling of supernatural is without a shadow of doubt, created by the fog, one of London's deadliest peasoupers. The fog slowly, but gradually constructs the sense of the supernatural by creating an illusion of uncertainty for both Arthur and the reader. This is conveyed when Arthur describes the fog.

"Fog was out door, hanging over the river, creeping in the and out of alleys and passages...sly entrance at every opening of a door."

This idea of the fog suggests the fog has become an entity by technique of personification used by Hill. This projects the idea that the fog is more than a fog. In that way it is given a beastly presentation especially by the use of the simile "like a furred beast". The distinct description of the fog provokes the inevitable thought of the supernatural with its ever-present malevolent force.

This idea of the isolation and remoteness is often used in the Gothic. It gives a clear sense of eeriness and vulnerability about Monk's Piece. This is the setting where Arthur begins his ghostly narrative in an attempt to 'Exorcise' the haunting of his past. This brings to mind the idea that when Arthur dies,
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his accounts of events would be found by someone else like the traditional manuscript found by Jonathon Harker in Bram Stoker's 'Dracula'.

The other main setting of the novel is Eel Marsh House. In comparison with Monk's piece, Eel Marsh House has an air of 'strange sensation, an excitement mingled with alarm.' Eel Marsh House is projected as a place that will have you startled with excitement but also vividly perceptive at the same time.

This is illustrated in the description when Arthur initially sets eyes on Eel Marsh House by saying; it was 'a tall, gaunt house' that is 'isolated' and 'uncompromising' but also on the other hand 'Handsome'. Nevertheless, Eel Marsh house is so indistinguishable of Monk's Piece in the sense of the sheer 'solitude' and 'loneliness' about the place. However, unlike Monk's Piece there is evil with a touch of wickedness about Eel Marsh House, this illustrates that Eel Marsh House is an updating of the Gothic castle. It is this Gothic aura that seems to be seducing Arthur. This idea can be unmistakably recognised when Arthur mentions that;

'I was aware of a heightened of every one of my senses, and

Conscious that this extraordinary place was imprinting itself on my mind and deep on my imagination too'

This cleverly hints the supernatural force that seems to be enveloping itself around Arthur, inevitably, he appears to be 'addicted' to the place and not discouraged by eeriness incorporated by the 'satanic' sea vultures and by the "bleakness" that is being hurled by the 'small burial ground' near Eel Marsh house which is typical Gothic iconography. This is further emphasised

by the condition of the decayed gravestone with ‘ patches of greenish-yellow lichen and moss’. Moreover, it’s the indecipherable dates and names on the Drablow’s graveyard that create mystery, just like how the novel’s time period and place of setting is left ambiguous.

An atmosphere of mystery and suspense is another key Gothic element in the gothic genre and ‘ The Woman in Black’ is no different. The presentation of London in ‘ A London Particular’ establishes the mystery and mood of the novel. The city is presented as ‘ dark’, ‘ evil-smelling’, with a ‘ foul gloom’ atmosphere, when these carefully constructed metaphors and adjectives bind, they do paint a vivid image for the reader.

In addition, the true sense of mystery and suspense is cemented by the introduction of Jennet Humfrye the Woman in Black herself. At the funeral of Mrs. Drablow, she is described as a woman with ‘ some terrible wasting disease’ a woman with skin that is ‘ tautly stretched’ and strikingly, a woman “ only a short time away from her own death”. This description deployed by Hill illustrates that this is no ordinary woman and inhuman in some sort even to the extent that she is a walking corpse, a curse on Crythin Gifford. Therefore, Hill sustains the key Gothic theme of death and curse in the novel.

The novel itself is built around the mystery of the woman and the tragic death of her child. This unravels that Jennet’s separated from her son because of the social stigma associated with children being born out of wedlock. This is heightened by the inexplicable behaviour of the Woman in Black and more effectively the reaction of those who see and hear of her presence. This is conveyed to the reader when Arthur says

' I had never in my life been so possessed by it, never known my knees to tremble

And my flesh to creep, and then to turn cold as stone'.

The absolute fear here is over-ridden by the total " danger" which she has caused him. This utter tantrum is fuelled by the unexplainable event of disappearance by the wasted woman. This high, even overwrought emotion is common in most Gothic novels; it clearly portrays the feeling of impending doom being experience by the character, in this case, Arthur when he is in " intense fear and sense of shock" as he witnessed the vanishing of The Woman in Black.

It is clear that Susan Hill effectively deploys the basics of gothic elements of gothic fiction. However, these elements are altered to appeal to a more modern audience in the case the castle. Therefore it can be said that Eel Marsh House is an updating of the Gothic Castle. Hill effectively sustains her Gothic genre of Gothic horror of contracting the soul, freezing the faculties and nearly annihilating them. This is apparent in " The Woman in The Black" several times with excessive examples of Arthur and even other characters including Mr. Jerome, when he is in shock, paralysed by fear of the Woman in Black;

" Mr. Jerome grabbed my wrist and held it in an agonizingly tight grip... or collapse with some kind of seizure."

Or even more effectively when the sense of danger and horror is built up using Arthur's companion dog Spider, who becomes accustomed to the threat present;

‘ Every her of her body was on end, her ears were pricked, her tail erect, the whole of her tense, as if ready to spring’

This form of reaction defines gothic horror capturing the idea developed by Ann Radcliffe.

Another Victorian/Edwardian convention of ghost stories that cements the pastiches of the novel is how the setting is kept ambiguous. This is shown when Mr Bentley sends Arthur to Eel Marsh ‘ in-shire?’ to ‘ represent the firm’ at Mrs Drablow’s funeral. Moreover, the context of the novel is kept unclear, because the story could be taking place after the First World War or more likely in the Edwardian period due to the lack of cars present and more significantly to the continuous appearances of a pony and trap in the novel as a leitmotif.

Overall, Susan Hill captures the mood of the Gothic genre and specially the sub-genre the ghost story. Hill shows a great variety of traditional gothic elements with a blend of originality and innovation by overturning the reader’s expectation of the genre inconsistently within the novel. “ In the woman in black” the oppressor is a woman and the victim is a man, Arthur, threatened by a powerful, impulsive and a tyrannical female, where on the other hand most gothic genre have a woman as a victim. Nevertheless, this ingenious thesis by Hill is a pleasant one because undoubtedly the novel is unpredictable while still consciously evoking the gothic.